

# Iowa CASA Advocate In-Service Training

Participant Guide

Iowa Child  
Advocacy Board

Report Writing

Understanding the Scope &  
Purpose of the CASA  
Advocate Role



## **Learning Outcomes:**

- Identify the characteristics of an effective CASA report
- Verbalize the keys to successful report writing
- Explain CASA Report Fundamentals
- Apply tips for report writing
- Summarize what to do and not do for an effective report
- Demonstrate how to complete a CASA Report

## **Agenda**

1. Welcome, Introductions, Learning Outcomes and Ground Rules
2. Elements of an Effective CASA Court Report
3. Keys to a Successful Report
4. CASA Report Fundamentals
5. Helpful Hints on Writing Assessments
6. CASA Report Writing Tips
7. Main Points of what to do and not do for your report
8. Information to Help You Write Your Own Report
9. Activity: Writing a report for your next hearing
10. Wrap Up, Evaluation



## Introduction

As you know, the children with whom we all advocate for are victims of child abuse and neglect, and many of them are in relative placement or foster care. They need a “voice in court” in order to find a safe, permanent home quickly - whether that means returning to a parent or being adopted. As an Advocate, one of your roles is to provide that voice, sharing with the court both the child’s wishes and your recommendations about what is in that child’s best interest. It is important work that requires the commitment of your time, your energy, and your heart.



This two and a half hour in-service training will provide you the opportunity to acquire the skills, knowledge, and comfort level to develop your own CASA Report for the child’s “voice in court”.

### **This training builds from Investigating and Gathering Information Toolkit: Understanding the scope and purpose of the CASA**

**Advocate Role:** You use the information you have gained in your Investigation/Assessment and incorporate that information into an objective and thorough CASA Report.

The purpose of this session is to clarify what goes into an effective CASA Report.

## **Importance of an Effective CASA Court Report**

The CASA court report is one of the most essential aspects of your work as an advocate. It is the tool to effectively communicate the child's perspective and best interest. It will also provide information on progress the parents are making. You will also provide your objective concerns and recommendations for what you see as being in the child's best interest. Using a standard report format also ensures professionalism, consistency and objectivity.

### **Writing a clear and compelling court report is essential to your work as a CASA Advocate.**

- It is the vehicle through which you present the information you have gathered about a child's situation. It includes information gathered on individuals involved, strengths of the family, your concerns, and your recommendations about what services will meet the child's needs and assist the parents in having the child returned to their custody.
- The court report becomes part of the official court record. It is introduced as an exhibit at court and considered evidence.
- You will submit child-focused and fact-based reports to the court for most hearings.
- The court report is admitted by the CASA Coordinator into EDMS where all the legal parties are able to view them. If the parent has an attorney, their attorney will provide them with a copy of the report. You should not distribute your report to anyone else. If someone believes they should receive a copy, they can get a copy from the DHS worker.



**Court reports provide visible documentation of an advocate's involvement.** Court reports that provide visible documentation of an advocate's involvement and that are presented in a consistent format increase a CASA Advocate's ability to effectively advocate for the child.

**The facts stated throughout the report are the foundation of the CASA Advocate's recommendations.** The facts stated throughout the report should be specific and descriptive. A report written from an honest and objective view can eliminate defensive attitudes and ease implementation of the volunteer's recommendations.

**Judges rely on the information in CASA court reports as they make their decisions.** You will submit reports before court hearings. The CASA court report provides a way to systematically organize pertinent information and give the court a clear mental image of the child's situation.



### **Keys to a Successful Report**

- The 4 C's: Clear, Concise, Complete, and Consistent
- Child Focused
- Current, first-hand, factual information
- Written with objective not subjective observations and statements
- Strength based
- Concerns based on information gathered
- Recommendations based on Concerns
- Use the court report format provided by your program
- Submit your report on time so CASA Coach or CASA Coordinator has time to review and comment on your report for changes as needed

## **CASA Report Fundamentals**

### **Basic Information**

- Type of Hearing
- Date and Time of Hearing
- Child's Name
- JVJV Number
- Date of Birth
- Current Age (Make sure it is correct)
- Report Date
- Court Appointed Date

### **Reporting Period and Persons Contacted**

- Date from CASA appointment for 1<sup>st</sup> report or from date of last CASA report
- Chart contacts made or attempted during the reporting period

### **Current Placement**

- List the current placement for each child

### **Assessment: Information obtained from interviews, visits and case file documentation**

- Each Child
- Mother
- Father
- Other Parties (DHS, Providers, Therapists, Foster Family, Relative Placement, Teachers, anyone else you talk to)

## Strengths

- Current strengths of the child(ren)
- Current strengths of the parent(s) and family

## Concerns

- List current concerns for the child(ren) and family based on the facts presented

## Recommendations

- List recommendations related to concerns
- Regarding:
  - Placement
  - Visitation
  - Services
  - Parental complinace
  - Other significant issues



## Writing the Assessment Section

In this section you provide a summary of the current status of the parties to the case as well as significant events, findings, conversations and milestones since your last report (or the last hearing if this is your first report for the case).

This section of the report should contain facts not opinions or conclusions. Save conclusions for the end of report, under Concerns and then Recommendations. You want to document your observations and what information you have discovered. You do not need to analyze anything you observe. Your wording should be like a movie camera. Be the eyes and ears for the judge. That is your role. Let the judge decide what is going on. You do not need to interpret. The judge actually prefers that we not interpret. Everything you write needs to be objective not subjective.

You may also include facts and statements provided by others including extended family members, service providers, teachers, therapists and foster parents. Make sure statements are verified and the person knows that you will be including them in your report. The information about the children are always first in this section and the parents information second.

### Possible words to use:

Observed, Appears, Seems to be, informed me, Learned.

### Words to avoid:

Words that make you appear to be the professional.  
Replace word choice such as the word “is” with optional words above.





## Critical Need for Objective Writing

### **Objective information is:**

observable: able to be seen, heard or touched, smelled, tasted

factual

able to be counted

able to be described

able to be imitated

the same from multiple reporters

as close to truth as we can get

helpful in decision making

### **Objective Language:**

I saw...

I counted... I

observed...

This is what s/he did.

This is what I/we did.

S/he said...

The sound s/he made sounded like this...

S/he stood in this place.

S/he made an action that looked like this...

### **Objective**

As I entered the home I smelled a strong odor that resembled cat urine. As I looked around the room, there were multiple piles of feces on the floor.

### **Subjective**

The home smelled bad and was very dirty.

Anything objective sticks to the facts, but anything subjective has feelings. In essence, objective and subjective are opposites.

Objective: It is raining. Subjective: I love the rain!

An objective is a goal, but to be objective is to be unbiased. If you're objective about something, you have no personal feelings about it.

### Objectivity vs. Subjectivity Examples

**Objective:** statement based on fact examples

- The court previously ordered 10 weeks of anger management classes. Dad attended one session on July 15.
- John and Jane have not visited each other in 4 months due to circumstances surrounding their caretakers' relationship. John continuously expresses his desire to visit with Jane. He has stated that to the CASA during every visit. It has been reported by others he shares that regularly in the foster home and during therapy sessions. CASA recommends court –ordered visitation to ensure they stay bonded.

**Subjective:** statement based on personal opinion, judgment, assumption

- Dad didn't seem interested in attending his anger management class.
- I think John and Jane's caretakers are acting selfishly and childishly. Because they can't get along, John and Jane haven't seen each other in a long time. I recommend that the Judge order the caretakers to arrange a sibling visit.

**It is best if words can show rather than just tell.** In other words, instead of saying, “*Jamie is happy to see her mom*” you might say, “*Jamie skipped down the sidewalk singing, ‘Mommy’s here! Mommy’s here!’ and throwing her arms around her mother when she reached her.*” Both clearly reflect that Jamie is happy to see her mom, but the second gives the judge a much clearer picture.

Write what you saw, not your conclusions about what you saw.

**Eliminate injected opinions and assumptions.** “*Emily did not attend her scheduled visitation with her children and did not call to cancel*” is good. “*Mom was too lazy to get out of bed and go see her kids, and couldn’t be bothered to pick up the phone and call!*” is Not an objective, unbiased way to explain the circumstance.

### **Remove negative emotions**

**Example with negative:** “*A myriad of trained professionals have had countless challenges trying to deal with the multitude of behavioral and emotional issues, yet these girls were sent back home many times over with an ill-equipped mother, ignorant to the ways with which to deal with these issues and thus set up to fail...By repeating these actions several times, many years have gone by, and these girls have grown way out of the desired adoptable age and into what is sometimes deplorable behavior indicative of the instability of child protective services.*”

### **Increase Specificity to Increase Credibility:**

#### **ACTIVITY:**                      **Saying it Differently Handout #3**

**Change the below examples to be more specific and objective using the handout. Will review answers as a class.**

- “The Mother-child visit went poorly.”
- “Johnny has been acting out.”
- “This case has been ongoing since I received it in March 2008.”
- “Sally needs stability right now in her life. She is confused and rebellious.”

**Make sure you include contact with all relevant parties.** This demonstrates that you are being objective by considering all facts and information from a “big picture lens” on what is the in the child(ren)’s best interest and have not made presumptions.

The state is providing reasonable efforts to the parent from whom the child was removed, but if the other non-custodial parent is available, it is important to show objectivity to also gather information regarding the non-custodial parent.

In addition, conversations with teachers and therapist can be quite valuable. Teachers, in particular, spend more time with this child than perhaps anyone else. Additionally, they usually know child development and they can talk about how the children interact with their peers.



**Avoid generic phrases.** A statement such as: “*Is making slow progress*” is open to interpretation. What does that mean? Is this something that could mean something different to another person? Do you have specific data to illustrate that slow progress?

## Additional Tips for the Assessment Section

Because DHS will be filing their own report, it is not necessary to include their observations. If DHS has made an observation you disagree with, you can address that in the concerns and/or recommendations sections by stating your position.

When you begin any of the sections for each individual child (narrative, strengths, concerns and recommendations), always use the same order such as oldest to youngest.



If a person's name appears in the 'Persons Contacted' chart, this usually but not always needs to be reflected somewhere in the body of the 'Information Obtained' narrative section.

The first time a child's name is in the report, it should be their full name. Thereafter, you can use the child's first name alone. If the child prefers his/her nickname, please honor his/her wishes by using their given name first followed by *"hereafter referred to as"* and referring to the child by his/her nickname throughout the rest of the report.

When referring to a parent, it is more respectful to use their given name rather than referring to them as "mom" or "dad." The first time their name appears, you should use the parent's first and last name. Subsequent reference to them in the body of the report can be the parent's first name.

The first time an acronym is used in the body of the report, spell out the entire title in parentheses behind it. i.e. *I contacted Jane Doe, FSRP (Family, Safety, Risk and Permanency) Worker or Jamie's diagnosis' include OCD, (Obsessive Compulsive Disorder).*

If you are reporting about something that you did not personally witness, narrate this by saying, *"Jane Doe reports..."*

## **Assessment Information for the CASA report**

### **For Children**

A brief and positive description of the child(ren) - special skills, talents, age.

Current Placement: description of any changes (type of placement and reason for change)

- Who lives in the home?
- Does the child have their own room? Or shares with how many other siblings?
- Describe the housing and neighborhood: apartment complex, duplex, single family home. New suburban neighborhood or urban older district.
- Does the child have responsibilities in the home? If so what are they? Wash dishes, clean own bedroom, does laundry. Does the child do them regularly and who reported the chores were/were not done regularly.
- Is there special concern about others in the home? A pregnant sibling in the home; is there one child with whom your child is especially close to or has a problem with? Are there a lot of people coming in and out of the home or tremendous activity in the home or very calm quiet surrounding?
- How is the child adjusting? State foster mother says....child says...

Education: including pre-school or Early Head Start

- What grade and school do they attend?
- Do they have an Individual Education Plan (IEP) in place and are other services provided to them at school? What is the date of last IEP?
- How is the child doing at school academically- provide specific grades.
- Any problems with behaviors or attendance? Give number of suspensions/detentions/behavior reports and the behaviors that



- How is the child doing in school socially? Are they involved in extra-curricular activities? Does that child want to participant in activities? If so, what?
- What comments did teachers provide regarding progress, issues/concerns and recommendations?
- What are the child's strengths in education?
- What was the child's attendance?
- How does the child interact with their peers and other staff?

- With whom does the child socialize? Friends in the neighborhood? Foster sibs? Children at school or church?
- In what types of activities outside of school does the child engage? Boy scouts? Church youth groups/choir? Sports?
- Does the child state they would like to participate in something? What is that activity?
- Do they have boyfriend/girlfriend? Best friend? Few friends or many?

- Is the child receiving therapy? If so, how often (frequency), with whom and what type (group, individual or family)?
- How often do they actually attend?
- What issues, in general, are being addressed?
- What progress, if any, is being made?
- How much does the child participate in therapy?
- Prognosis and/or recommendations by therapist?
- Date of most recent evaluation?
- If not in therapy, has this been recommended by professionals to occur?
- Are there behavioral issues? In what setting?





Medical/Dental: date of last appointment, current health status, and developmental issues

- Is child on medication currently? If so, who provides them and follows up on meds? What is medication for? Is the child compliant with medications?
- What additional issues have been identified by doctor/dentist that may need to be addressed?
- What services are being provided to deal with any issues?
- Does the child need additional special examination (eye/ortho/gyno)?
- Do not say “the child is in good health” as you are not a doctor. Can state “mom/foster mother/child report there have been no health concerns”.

Additional Services: transition to adulthood issues, independent living skills

- Have any key services to the child begun (or ended) during this period and are any either pending or being recommended?

Visitation: with parents, siblings, or other connections

- What is the visitation schedule?
- How often does the child actually see the parent, family members or other siblings, and in what circumstances (length of visit; type-supervised, semi supervised, or unsupervised and by whom; where is the visit held)?
- How does the child get to the visit? Who is responsible for transportation?
- What are the child’s interactions with such person during visitation?
- How is the parent’s interaction with child during visit?
- Have parents attended all scheduled visits?
- If visits have been cancelled, what were the reasons for cancelation?
- How long until visit rescheduled?
- What are these visits like for the child?





Child's Personal Statements:

- Has the child expressed any wishes/statements they would like included in the report on permanency, visits, or their concerns. For example: the child wants to go home; a bike; to go to summer camp; dye their hair; a driver's license; to visit an incarcerated parent.
- Include their quotes to the judge if obtained.
- A child can include hand written statements or letters to the court. An optional form is available for you to share with the child that can be used as a guide but it is not required.
- Handout #4 Child's Report to the Court



## **For Parents**

- A brief description of current residence/whereabouts and any changes during reporting period
- Ask the parent what their understanding of what is needed to be done/expectations to be successful in order to get their children returned back home. What are the possibilities for non-compliance such as transportation, getting fired for missing work; etc. Are there any goals they are having trouble completing? What do they need help with?
- What services are being provided to, or is the parent availing himself of, in pursuing the goals of the case plan?
- Review DHS Case Plan recommendations for expectations of participation in services: type of service, who provides, attendance, what progress they think they are making, concerns they may have regarding the service.
  - Therapy – Have they been able to attend regularly? What progress do they believe they are making?
  - Drug treatment if drug case – Are they attending and do they believe they are making progress? Do they have a sponsor?
  - FSRP Services – Are they finding the FSRP worker helpful? What is the FSRP worker helping them with?
  - Visitation – How often do they get to visit the children? How are the visits going?
  - You will want to also include your observations of visits.
- Do they have transportation, if not, have they informed DHS?
- Has the court ordered services in addition to the DHS Case Plan? If so, review with the parents.
- Include in your report, progress or lack of compliance with case plan goals and court ordered requirements
- What do service providers or others familiar with the parents note regarding the parent's progress towards their case plan objectives?
- How often and in what circumstances did you see the parent?

- What did you observe in terms of the parent's appearance, demeanor and behavior?
- Did the parent convey thoughts or concerns regarding the children, progress with their case plan or future plans that would be of interest to the Court?
- If you spent time reminding the parent what the judge expects of them/ordered, include what the parent's response was.
- Include statement from parent: regarding your report and ask parent if they have something they would like the court to know.
- Report any family support or strengths.
- What additional information regarding any of the areas noted in CPP was gathered during the reporting period?
- If drug screens are done, you only need to include if they were clean, dirty or missed.
- If medication is prescribed and is connected to a concern stated in the CPP, then include general information about what the parent has shared with you about the issue. *(HIPAA regulations require specific release for this information to be distributed if the source of that information is someone other than the patient.)*



## **For Other Parties**

You will want to include statements from others involved with the family.

### **Caretakers** (relatives, foster parents, etc.)

- How is the child doing in their home?
- Do they have any concerns?
- How are the visits from their perspective?
- Is the child eating well?
- Are there any health concerns?
- Do they get along with other children in the home?
- How is their behavior at home and at school, and outside the home?

### **Service Providers**

- Therapist and FSRP workers – Attendance, Progress, and Concerns
- Teachers – Attendance, Progress, Concerns, how are they doing academically and socially? How are they dressed? Are they tired when they come to school?
- Day Care Providers – How do they get along with other children and their attendance? Do they have any concerns?
- If the parents have a Parent Partner you do not need to talk to them because what they talk about with the parent is confidential. We want the parent to feel comfortable talking with the Parent Partner and know that it will not be shared with others.



## Strength section of the CASA report

This section is for identifying and outlining the strengths of the Children and the Family. Report any strengths related to one individual, for the entire family, or for family supports. For example, does the family have friends, relatives, church members, or others who provide the family with needed support? Is the parent making progress in court ordered services? Does the parent have housing, employment, or positive social activities?

Make sure strengths are numbered separately, beginning with the oldest child first, then moving on to the strengths of the parents after identifying strengths for all the children.

Do not forget to include any smaller steps of progress the child and family are making toward any goal outline in the CPP domains such as related to attending therapy, school, visitations, or maintaining employment. It is important to remember that people are more likely to build upon their strengths and as a result more likely to be successful when their strengths are noticed and honored.

### Examples might be:

Children appear to be thriving in their current living environment. *Make sure there is an objective example in the assessment section to support the statement.*



Jane (mother) appeared to have demonstrated proper parenting skills with Sally during their visit. *Give an example or refer to what the FSRP or therapist has reported that they observed to say they are demonstrating proper parenting skills.* You are not the professional so you need to support your statements with information professionals have told you unless it is something you observe.

## Possible Strength phrases/words

Resilience	Hope
Compassion	Adaptability
Faith	Spiritual well-being
Openness to change	Growing through crisis together
Shared ethical values	Appreciation
Affection	Agreeing to disagree
Sharing fun times	Being able to compromise
Enjoys simple good times	Good things take time
Enjoying each other's company	Avoiding blame
Quality time in great quantity	Giving compliments
Sharing feelings	Spend time together
Positive communication	Humor
Sharing	Playfulness
Faithfulness	Dependability
Respect for individuality	Friendship
Honesty	Caring for each other
Trust	Commitment
Ability to cope with stress & crisis	Seeing crises as challenges and opportunities

[www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G2-3406900165.html](http://www.encyclopedia.com/doc/1G2-3406900165.html)



## **Possible Family Strengths**

- Family speaks English well.
- Child and/or significant family members do not speak English. Translator or native language speaker is needed for successful intervention, but a qualified individual can be identified within natural supports.
- Family has financial resources necessary to meet needs.
- Family has financial resources necessary to meet most needs; however, some limitations exist.
- Family has sufficient resources to meet basic food needs without being supplemented by community resources.
- Family has sufficient resources to mostly meet basic food needs, using supplements from community resources. Family is receptive to using those resources until such time as able to meet needs without support.
- Family has no transportation needs.
- Family has occasional transportation needs. However, these can be met through existing natural supports.
- Quality, affordable child care is being used or child care is not needed.
- Child care is hard to find and afford, but family is able to provide care.
- Family has minor concerns about child care status, but is independently working towards a resolution.
- Quality, affordable medical care is available and being used by all family members.



## **Possible Family Strengths continued**

- Family in stable housing with no known risks of instability.
- Parents/caregivers have minimal difficulties with organizing or maintaining household to support needed services.
- Family has sufficient resources so that there are few limitations on what can be provided for the child/ren.
- Home is clean, maintained well and child-proofed. Dangerous items (e.g., poisons, medications, knives, matches) are locked up/stored away properly and out of reach.
- Kitchen and bathroom are functional. All utilities are operational. Everyone has a bed and outlets are plugged.
- Parents/caregivers appear to be well organized as they have immediate access to their important documents and bills.
- Family has the necessary resources to help address the child's basic needs but those resources might be stretched.
- Parent/caregiver seems to have no apparent substance abuse related limitations that impact or impair their parent/caregiving ability and child care at this time.
- Child/parent appears to have no evidence of hygiene or grooming problems as they are independently completing all relevant activities such as bathing, grooming, and dressing.
- Parent/caregiver has no known legal difficulties.

**Adapted from:**

<http://www.oregon.gov/dhs/children/differential-response/Documents/family-needs-assessment-manual.pdf>



## Concerns section of the CASA report

In this section you synthesize the facts you have presented previously in your report into your concerns or personal conclusions. It is important to clearly explain what observations or facts led to your concern(s). The analysis provided within this section should support your recommendations, which are provided in list form in the last section of the report.

Included in this section might be concerns you might have regarding:

- ✓ any other issues not covered that you believe needs to be addressed and has not been at this time.
- ✓ unmet needs that are identified that can be met by the family or community resources
- ✓ the safety of the child,
- ✓ the interaction between the child and parents,
- ✓ interaction between parents,
- ✓ whether or not the child's needs are being met

Make sure each concern is numbered separately. Similar to the strengths section, beginning with the oldest to youngest child and then list concerns for the parents, relatives or family unit. These should be short, concise statements that start with, *"I am concerned..."* and what you believe attention needs to be called.

Make sure the concerns are consistent with your observations. If the assessment section includes an observation that Jamie is still having problems with bedwetting, nightmares and occurrences of petty theft, these should be addressed in the concerns section. Likewise, if it's a concern, it should be in your observation section. You do not need to reiterate all previous details in the concerns section if you have done a good job narrating in the observation section. It can simply say, *"I'm concerned that Jamie continues to struggle with..."*



## **Recommendations section of the CASA report**

In this section you provide your recommendations in list form about what the judge could order. This is completed in order of the following issues: Court involvement; placement; services; visitation; other significant issues.

### **Example:**

1. I recommend that the child be adjudicated a child in need of assistance.  
(OR) I recommend that the child remain adjudicated a child in need of assistance. (OR) I recommend that the case be closed.
2. Child(ren) remain in current placement or to what change you think should occur in the child's best interest.
3. Make a recommendation for the parents regarding compliance with court orders (specify any services that they are not complying with).
4. Make a recommendation if there are other services or community resources that might help the child and/or family.
5. Make recommendation regarding the visitation plan if you are not in agreement with the current arrangement.
6. Reunification services for both parents continue and they follow the case plan;
7. This case be reviewed in x months.

Each recommendation is numbered separately. Maintain consistency as in other sections, beginning with the oldest to youngest child and then list recommendations for parents and other case parties.



Recommendations should be strong, confident stand-alone statements. Words like "look into" or "consider providing" are too wishy-washy.

It is better to frame the statements positively and to avoid the use of double negatives. So instead of it saying, "I recommend that Child not be returned home yet," say, "I recommend that Child remain in her current foster care placement."

### **Adjudication Hearing:**

We do not usually make recommendations at an Adjudication Hearing. At this hearing the judge is relying on the evidence that the State has submitted to decide if the court should intervene. This evidence is usually the Child Protective Assessment or witnesses. If we are assigned at removal and enough time has passed you may have a report but you would not make a recommendation regarding Adjudication. Your report would contain your observations and what people have told you. You could make a recommendation regarding where the children should be placed for now. If the judge decides to adjudicate then there will be a dispositional hearing scheduled.

### **Dispositional Hearing:**

At this hearing the DHS worker will have filed the Case Permanency Plan. This is the “to do” list for the family. You can list any recommendation that is based on your concerns which are based on the assessment section in your report.

### **Review Hearing:**

A review hearing is an update on how the family is making progress at doing the “to do” list. Your assessment will have observations and information from professionals on how the family is doing. You will have concerns based on that information and then make recommendations based on the concerns.

### **Permanency Hearing:**

You will need to make a recommendation to either:

1. Return the child to the parental home because *(state why this is in the child’s best interest)*
2. Grant an extension before determining permanency because *(state why this is in the child’s best interest)*.
3. Termination of parental rights because *(state why this is in the child’s best interest)*.
4. Relative care because *(state why this is in the child’s best interest)*.
5. Another planned permanent living arrangement because *(state why this is in the child’s best interest)*.

## Take Notes

When formalizing notes at a later time, write them in a report format that way when it comes time to compile the report you have most of it done.



- Jane, from Visiting Nurse Services, informed me that she had made the AEA (Area Education Agency) referrals.
- According to Paul (bio dad), Johnny did not have any current medical concerns or needs at this time.

### Include Affirmations (Strengths)

Identify things that are going well/positive as well as areas of improvement and /or challenges.

### Include All Parties

Be sure you are following up during your information gathering work and including in your court report writing information on all involved parties.

Even if you did not get a chance to connect with someone, include that you tried to have contact with that party in your report. This can be a narrative or simply marked as “Attempt” in the Persons Contacted Section.



### Be Confident

Sometimes what we have to report is not the best news and can be a little nerve wracking. Trust in what you write and be confident in your report. If you have kept it factual and objective, there is nothing to worry about.

If you recommend something you need to know why and how you made your decision and then stand by it.



### Be Open

Advocates also need to remain open to new ideas and be willing to think outside of the box.

## Main Points: The Dos and Don'ts of Report Writing

### Do...

- Feel confident to write your own court report.
- Be thoughtful about your questions to gather the most comprehensive, accurate information.
- Check with your coach or coordinator regarding the date for submitting both the draft and final report to court.
- A particular time frame is required for several reasons:
  - The coach or coordinator may ask you to do some additional research or documentation.
  - The coach or coordinator needs time to edit the report and talk with you about any clarifications.
  - The coach or coordinator may have other court reports to edit, and each one takes time to process appropriately.
  - The reports need to be submitted to the court electronically so the judge and appropriate parties will get a copy in a timely manner so they can review it well in advance of the hearing. (They have many cases to prepare for also).



**Note:** If case activity occurs after you've submitted your report, consult with your coach or coordinator, who will assist you in bringing any new information to the court.

- Update all of your contacts and relevant information prior to writing the report.
- Make sure all the names, titles, quotes and dates are correct.
- If you use email, keep the child's last name and other identifying information about anyone involved in the case out of email transmission.
- Notify the DHS worker about important developments or recommendations that are bound to cause surprise or controversy.

- Include only factual statements.
- Use the local CASA program's approved court report template.
- Write in simple, straightforward language, addressing only relevant topics. Make sure all the major headings are covered.
- Be concise and very specific.
- Ensure that all of your recommendations are child-focused.
- Support all of your recommendations with corresponding information in the "Information obtained from interviews, visits and case file documentation section".
- Address the appropriateness of the child's placement in your recommendations. Your first recommendation following the court involvement recommendation should be where the children should be placed or remain at this time. If they are in different locations, please list them as a separate recommendation.





## Do NOT...

- Assume that your coach or coordinator is more prepared to write your court report than you are.
- Neglect to update your contacts and other information before writing your report.
- Consider a phone call to the DHS worker to be sufficient information for writing the court report.
- Include judgmental or opinionated comments.
- Forget to edit. Be sure to look for any errors before submitting it to your coach or coordinator.
- List the foster parents by name. You can use first names but leave off last names.
- Be inconsistent with names and titles. If “mom” is used in one section, refer to her that way throughout the report; do not use both “mom” and “biological mother”. (It is actually preferable to use parent’s first name instead of mom or dad).
- Try to impress the court with extraneous information or legal jargon.
- Make recommendations that are outside the scope of the hearing or information that you have not reported.
- Feel that you must agree with DHS or other parties.
- Be shy about letting the court know something important about the child or case.
- Cut and paste e-mails or information from another person’s report. Paraphrase if you think the information is important and state where the information was taken from. Remember the judge will have read the other report if it is submitted as evidence.



**DOOOOON'T DO IT**



## Remember...

1. **Court report writing begins when you are first assigned a case.** Accurate notes with quotes and dates are essential for good court report writing.
2. **Do not assume the reader knows the information you know.**
3. **The body of reports** (background information, child's section, parent's section) should be factual. You will be given an opportunity in the report to share your thoughts when you write the strengths, concerns, and recommendations.
4. **The report should be uniform and flow from section to section.** Your facts, assessments and recommendations should be consistent with one another.
5. **Incidents should be reported in chronological order of occurrences.** This makes the report easier to understand.
6. **Use quotes whenever possible but use sparingly.** When not using direct quotes, information stated in reports should be attributed to someone. For example, the foster mother reports that...
7. **Stay clear of value system wording.** For example, the house was very dirty. Describe the conditions instead.
8. **Sentences should be concise and clear.** Rule of thumb: If a sentence or paragraph does not make sense the first time you read it, it probably needs to be rephrased.
9. **Reports should include all necessary information but be succinct and concise.** Adhere to any page limitations.
10. **You are under time constraints.** CASA programs and the courts have time lines.
11. **It is important to complete your editing of the report.** Be sure to fix spelling and grammatical errors and double check names and dates and use the Editing Checklist.



## Proofreading and Editing

Remember, your coach/coordinator will be providing you with feedback and edits to help you learn how to write an effective report. Edits are not a personal reflection upon you and your skills as an Advocate. Even seasoned Advocates have edits suggested by their proofreader.

### What do Coaches/Coordinators look for when reviewing your draft report?

- Organization-following report template
- Appropriate length
  - If content is too short you will be asked to:
    - ✓ elaborate
    - ✓ Increase specificity to increase credibility
    - ✓ It is your opportunity to share important information potentially only the CASA gathered
  - If your report is too long:
    - ✓ Relay only the most relevant and pertinent information.
    - ✓ Do not transcribe every visit notes directly into report template without editing.
    - ✓ Eliminate opinions or diagnoses.
- Content/Analysis/coherence
  - Are the Recommendations supported by the facts and then the concerns that are highlighted in the body of the report?
  - Do the recommendations follow logically from the other information included?
- Objectivity
  - Is the report is fact based, child focused
  - Do negative emotions or biased perspective need to be eliminated?
  - Scrutinize report as the parent's attorneys will
  - Play Devil's Advocate, question subjective statements

- Mechanics such as spelling and grammar: Ensure spellcheck complete. Consider using free program Grammarly.com.
  - Common errors in Basic Information Section
    - *Type of hearing* (at the top), the *JVJV number(s)* and the *age* of the child(ren), which changes when they have a birthday.
    - Unclear information under the Current Placement of the Child heading. Consider using a statement such as "*Jimmy is in foster care with John and Betty Smith*" or "*in the ABC Residential Facility,*" rather than simply saying "foster care" or "residential facility."
    - Include the number of contacts including face to face. A concern for you would be a lack of face to face contact, too many face to face contacts, no contact with specific party such as a parent. (Unless they are not available or you cannot reach them.)
  - Timelines
    - It is critical that your draft report is submitted on time for review and editing so that a complete final report can be submitted to the court on time.
    - Procrastinating writing your court report hurts you and the reviewer as every other task must be put on pause to get this important document to the court on time.
- ✓ Talk to coordinator/coach about frustrations and be open minded to constructive feedback.



## **Editing the Court Report Checklist**

### **COMPOSITION OF REPORT**

- \_\_\_1. The advocate included comments in all prescribed sections of the report template provided. (Questions in their report template are a guide, advocates do not need to answer each one.)
- \_\_\_2. The report is in narrative form, no bullet points.
- \_\_\_3. The Assessment section contains only facts and observations about each person in the case since last report.
- \_\_\_4. The Strengths comments pertain to child, parents, and other parties.
- \_\_\_5. The Concerns section contains statements based on the facts/observations in the body of the report.
- \_\_\_6. The Recommendation section contains statements based on the facts of the Assessment Section and Concerns.
- \_\_\_7. The Persons Contacted section contains a list of persons of interest interviewed and a list of records/documents reviewed since the last report.
- \_\_\_8. The CASA is consistent in the use of "I" or "this CASA" throughout the report.
- \_\_\_9. Sentences are complete.
- \_\_\_10. Sources of information are identified.
- \_\_\_11. Facts are presented objectively and factually. Judgmental statements are absent.
- \_\_\_12. Information is well organized
- \_\_\_13. The report is child centered.
- \_\_\_14. After reading the report, the reader has a good mental picture of the situation, accurate information on the current status and the advocates concerns and recommendations.

**SPELLING. GRAMMAR. PUNCTUATION. CAPITALIZATION**

- \_\_\_1. There are no misspelled words in the report because the advocate used “spell check” on the finished report.
- \_\_\_2. There’s subject-verb agreement, complete sentences, proper tense of verbs, appropriate punctuation and capitalization throughout the report.
- \_\_\_3. For each acronym, the advocate wrote out the words the first time the writer used the acronym and then used just the acronym throughout the report.
- \_\_\_4. The advocate used the “active” voice rather than the passive voice throughout the report.
- \_\_\_5. The advocate avoided use of quotation marks and contractions and didn’t leave anything dangling. If quotations are used, double check that they are accurate in word and citation.
- \_\_\_6. Sentences are reasonable and varied in length. Sentences are concise, using the fewest number of words needed to describe the action or occurrence. Information that is extraneous is removed.
- \_\_\_7. Contractions and abbreviations are avoided.
- \_\_\_8. There is consistency throughout the report on names and titles used for all parties. The spelling of names is double checked. Capitalization of names and titles is double checked.
- \_\_\_9. Appropriate courtesy titles are used. (Ms., Mrs., Mr., Dr.)
- \_\_\_10. Common error locations are proofed: Near beginning or endings of lines; near the bottom of a page; in number combinations; in proper nouns; in long words.
- \_\_\_11. Common mistakes are proofed: Transposing letters within a sentence or within one word; Omission of one letter in a pair of doubled letters; Substituting one small word for another or doubling small words. (if, in, as, by be)

**As an exercise please read this:**

After reading the  
the sentence. You are  
now aware that the  
the human brain often  
does not inform you that the  
the word "the" has been  
repeated twice every time.

**Are you smarter than a first grader?**

Why don't you catch the double *the* right away, when a young child most likely would? It has to do with your brain's experience level at reading. An inexperienced or learning reader would almost surely see the extra *the* because new readers tend to read a phrase word by word, taking in every syllable as a discrete chunk of information. With that approach, catching the extra *the* would occur. However, experienced readers take in phrases and sentences in groups. We also extract information from context and have strong expectations about which words should appear where. So it's not as easy to catch an unexpected, anomalous extra word on a different line. Since our brains are not expecting there to be two instances of the word "the" in a row, when we process the phrase as a whole, our brains ignore it.

Source URL: <http://www.brainhq.com/brain-resources/brain-teasers/double-talk>

So when reviewing your work be aware of this thinking process. You want to catch your mistakes and correct them.

## **Practice: Writing Your Own Report**

**Handout #5 is the expanded template for the CASA Report.**

It will be given to you to fill out using information from your own case that you have brought with you today.

If you brought a Laptop and the template has been e-mailed to you then you can fill it out using your computer.

**Handout #2 is the CASA Report Guide** to help remind you of what goes in each section. You can also refer to the previous pages of this report writing toolkit to assist you in filling out your report.

You will use the information you brought with you today regarding your CASA case to write your report.

Briefly review your Action Plan and Monthly Update, along with any notes you brought with you today.

Remember – your report is NOT your notes pasted into a report (unless you have streamlined them in anticipation of including them in your report).

You want to give the judge and the parties a picture of what is going on in this family's life and the progress or lack of progress that is being made for reunification.

**As you are filling it out please feel free to ask the facilitator for clarification of anything that may need to go in your report.**

Your Coach, or Coordinator if you do not have a Coach, will review and edit your draft report and provide you with suggestions to make before your Coordinator submits the final report to court.



### **Remember**

The CASA court report is one of the most essential aspects of your work as an advocate. It is the tool to effectively communicate the child's perspective and best interest. It will also provide information on progress the parents are making. Using the standard report format including all the essential sections ensures professionalism, consistency and objectivity.

You can be the eyes and ears for the judge.





**Evaluation: *Report Writing: Understanding the scope and purpose of the CASA volunteer role.***

Please complete this evaluation of the in-service training module. Did you learn what was intended? (6 is high and 1 is low)

Learning Outcomes	Ratings					
	6	5	4	3	2	1
1. I can identify the characteristics of an effective CASA Report						
2. I can verbalize the keys to successful report writing.						
3. I can explain CASA Report Fundamentals						
4. I can apply tips for report writing						
5. I can summarize what to do and not do for an effective report						
6. I can demonstrate how to complete a CASA Report						
7. The content of this session was						
8. The materials were						
9. The activities were						
10. The facilitator was						
11. Overall, I rate this session						

**12. What was the most valuable to you?**

**13. Is there anything we could improve or do differently?**

**14. Identify additional topics you would like to learn more about.**

**Date of in-service:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Facilitator:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Thank you for your participation and feedback!**